

CENTRE FOR NATIVE EDUCATION

ACTIVITY REPORT Fall 1995

Introduction

The Centre for Native Education was established in September 1992 by the Concordia Council on First Nations Education (CCFNE). In early 1995, CCFNE folded and the Centre for Native Education became part of Concordia's Advocacy and Support Services.

The Centre for Native Education's goal has always been to help Native students achieve academic success. In order to do so, the Centre offers a wide variety of services to ensure that Native people who choose to study at Concordia enjoy a relatively problem-free academic experience.

After being closed for the summer, the Centre for Native Education reopened its doors in September 1995 to welcome new and returning students to Concordia. The semester was offset by the arrival of a new coordinator, Manon Tremblay, hired in September to replace outgoing director Gerald Alfred.

During the semester, the new coordinator focused on learning as much as she could about her new position. Most importantly, Ms. Tremblay took pains to cultivate friendly relationships with each student visiting the Centre, whether Native or non-Native. Due to the late arrival of the new coordinator, the Centre for Native Education was not able to offer as many services or indulge in as many activities as hoped. However, the Centre did undertake some activities (and participate in others) during the semester.

Services

In addition to helping students solve their problems on a case by case basis, the Centre also offered basic services that Native students rely on extensively. In fact, these services are so appreciated that word has spread and the Centre is now attracting a handful of regular non-Native students. These students have the two following characteristics in common: they were all introduced to the Centre by a Native friend and/or study partner and, interestingly enough, they are all international students and/or visible minorities.

The Centre for Native Education has made a point of welcoming all students regardless of their background, with the understanding that when demand is high for a particular service, Native students automatically and invariably come first.

The following is a breakdown of the services offered at the Centre:

Study Space

Throughout the semester, Native students have used the Centre as a quiet place to study, whether on their own or as members of study groups. Even at busy times, the Centre has successfully accommodated a large number of students who have voiced their appreciation of the Centre's accessibility on countless occasions. It is this opportunity to access a quiet space for study that seems to draw the Centre's regular non-Native students.

Even though opening hours are 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, the Centre for Native Education recognizes that some students need a quiet place to rest or study beyond these hours. A handful of students have been able to access the Centre with an After Hours Pass, a convenient service which was highly appreciated, especially around mid- and end of term.

Computer Access

Many Native students do not own a typewriter or a computer. The Centre for Native Education has two Mackintosh and two IBM computers at the students' disposal. During the fall of 1995, the Centre's coordinator has provided technical support and has taught several students how to use a computer. Consequently, access to these computers is very popular with students.

Telephone

Although Native students do not use the phone extensively, several students -especially those with a young family, appreciate the fact that they can be contacted at Concordia if a need or a crisis arises at home. Students also enjoy free phone calls in a place where they do not need to shout over the phone to make themselves heard and where they can make calls in relative privacy.

Photocopier

If the sheer number of the photocopies the average student will make in the course of his or her studies is taken into consideration as well as the financial constraints of Native students in general, it is easily understood why this is one of the most popular services offered by the Centre. Students also like the fact that they can operate the photocopier themselves -with technical support at hand when a problem arises.

Fax Machine

The fax machine is but rarely used by students at the Centre. An older model, it has proved more difficult to operate than it is worth. Moreover, when a Native student does need to use a fax machine, it is usually to send urgent documents to long-distance band councils and governments. This, of course, can not be done since only local faxes can be sent from this line.

Documentation Centre

The Centre for Native Education offers students a good selection of books and periodicals dealing with Native issues. Students may consult these at any time and may also borrow the books on a two-week basis. The documentation centre has proved to be very popular with Native and non-Native students alike. In fact, most of the non-Native students who visit the Centre, do so specifically to consult these resource materials. The Centre for Native Education hopes to gradually expand its book collection in the years to come in order to offer a wider selection of topics to students.

Kitchen Facilities

The Centre has a small kitchen outfitted with a refrigerator, microwave oven, toaster, kettle, coffee maker and dishes. Students who visit the Centre actively use the kitchen and appreciate the fact that it offers them the opportunity to bring a meal from home that they can warm up.

Board Room

The Centre for Native Education has a Board room at the disposal of any student, staff or faculty who wish to use it. It is actively used by study groups and union staff meetings.

Job Opportunities, Awards, Scholarships and Miscellaneous

In addition to all the services listed above, students can find a wealth of information at the Centre for Native Education, ranging from upcoming lectures and conferences to job offers. All qualifying students are encouraged to apply for scholarships and awards and the Centre makes sure that they are aware of summer employment opportunities.

Personalized Services

Students know that when they have a problem, the Centre's staff is there to help. If the Centre can not handle a particular case, the student is automatically referred to more competent sources within the University environment. Personalized services offered at the Centre this semester are listed below.

Lending an Ear

More often than not, Native students must leave their communities to achieve higher education. As a consequence, they often feel isolated in unfamiliar surroundings and, when there is a problem, they feel as though there is no one to turn to. The Centre for Native Education's coordinator has always made herself available to lend an ear and offer comfort to students who need someone to talk to about their personal problems or concerns.

Potential Students

During the semester, the Centre has received 6 Native people who were contemplating studies at Concordia. The Centre gave general information about registration and programs and encouraged all potential students to come back to the Centre for further guidance.

Counselling and Referrals

Students often come to the Centre anxious about their performance in class. Once the reason behind the anxiety is identified, individual students are referred to the appropriate services. During the semester, the Centre was able to help several students in this respect. The following are some concerns brought to the Centre as well as the type of intervention which followed.

- A mechanical engineering student is anxious about his performance in school. He studies hard and knows his subject well but does not do well in papers and exams. He is on probation and afraid of failing his courses. He has gone to Counselling and Development but nothing has helped. The student was referred to Corrinne Jette who paired him up with tutors. The Centre for Native Education also paired him with another mechanical engineering student who is doing well in his courses.

- A student is uncertain if her choice of program is suited for her after all. Her grade point average is extremely low and she believes that she would do better in another program. The student is referred to Counselling and Development. She then thinks about switching to Political Science. The Centre refers her to Gerald Alfred for academic advising.

- A student is concerned about a possible language barrier problem. He says that he can not understand half of what the professor is saying in class. The Centre advises him to use a tape recorder.

- A student is concerned that her poor writing skills might in fact be a sign of dyslexia. She is referred to Counselling and Development.

Help With Assignments

Although the Centre's coordinator does not believe in giving all the answers to students who are writing papers, a little input often helps students calm their

fears. At the students' request, the coordinator has often proofread papers for grammatical mistakes, typos or to evaluate general writing skills. It is generally understood that the coordinator will not help students with the subject of the paper itself.

Information on Native Peoples and Cultures

Most of the non-Native students who visit the Centre are looking for information on Native people, whether for an assignment or out of personal curiosity. Numerous phone calls have been received to this effect. The Centre provides the needed information through its documentation centre, informal conversations and suggests other avenues to learn more.

Academic Advising

The Centre has been quite fortunate this semester in playing host to two professors, Gerald Alfred and Stan Munoz. Prof. Alfred was available to advise students who made an appointment with him. Prof. Munoz used office space and came weekly to the Centre to meet with students. These arrangements worked out very well and students appreciated both professors' down-to-earth approach to their needs. Prof. Alfred and Prof. Munoz will continue offering the same services next semester.

Mary Mar, from Counselling and Development, has also offered her services to the Centre for Native Education this semester. Ms. Mar was ready to set aside some time every week to come to the Centre and meet students. After three visits, Ms. Mar and the Centre's coordinator were forced to admit that this arrangement was not working out. Although students were aware that counselling services were offered on a regular basis, no one prevailed themselves to use them while Ms. Mar was at the Centre. Consequently, this service was interrupted and students needing counselling are now sent to Counselling and Development offices.

Student Population

The following is a breakdown of the students who have visited the Centre for Native Education during the fall term*:

General Native student population:	62
Native students:	34
Other Native people:	16
Non-Native Students:	23

*Note: These numbers apply only to the period between October 5 and December 23, 1995. No records were taken prior to October 5. Furthermore, there is no way of knowing how many people come to the Centre when the coordinator is absent.

Visits (Native students):

Once a week or more:	10
Twice a month or more:	9
Once a month:	6
Less than once a month:	9

The Centre for Native Education is visited by an average of 10 Native and non-Native students a day. However, this figure can be quite misleading since it does not take slow and peak days into account. It also does not reflect normally busy days where no one comes because of foul weather or the first and last two weeks of a semester when students either have no assignments/concerns or are finished with their course loads.

There are three busy periods in a semester when students are most likely to need help. These are the beginning of the semester when students sort out their courses, need orientation on Campus and help with red tape.; mid-term when the first wave of papers and exams hit; and end of semester when students do their finals. Understandably, these peak periods are preceded and followed by slow periods which affect the overall average. Moreover, within a given week, a pattern of student visits emerges. Fridays are predictably slow since most students have no classes. Thursdays, on the other hand, are extremely busy with as many as 20 students using the Centre's services.

Statistics such as the ones presented above also do not reflect the amount of time that a student will spend at the Centre. And yet, most students will visit for an average period of two to three hours.

It is obvious that the Centre for Native Education must strive to make itself better known in order to increase its student attendance record. To help in this process, a monthly newsletter is mailed to all Native students, whether they visit the Centre or not. In this way, students receive information that can be crucial for their studies as well as news about events of special interest to Native students.

Slow days have their advantages for the Centre's staff. These are often the only days when administrative duties can be attended to without too many interruptions. Furthermore, many Native students need time-consuming personalized service. Slow days are welcome periods to take care of these individual needs.

Activities

In addition to helping Native students achieve academic success, the Centre for Native Education also seeks to increase awareness of Native issues and knowledge of Native culture among the Concordia community. With this in mind, the Centre responds to requests for presentations whenever possible.

In November, the Centre's coordinator and student assistant were invited to speak to a class of international students about Native culture and traditional values. The discussion took the form of questions asked by students. Both the coordinator and the student assistant enjoyed the opportunity to talk about Native issues and the students showed their interest by the tremendous amount of questions they asked.

On November 23, 1996, the Centre for Native Education in collaboration with the Women's Centre was proud to host an evening with Ellen Gabriel. Ms. Gabriel spoke for over an hour on the political unrest in her home community as a result of the aftermath of the Oka Crisis. Ms. Gabriel drew a crowd of approximately 60 people who all sat mesmerized as she spoke. The question period lasted almost an hour and people were able to talk to Ms. Gabriel personally after her speech. Everyone enjoyed their evening and Ms. Gabriel has expressed the hope of coming to speak at Concordia again.

On November 15, 16 and 17, 1995, Quebec Native Women hosted This is Dawn, a conference on violence in Native communities. The Centre for Native Education sent three students to the conference. The coordinator also attended and did all the translation work required for the conference, including a magazine and a brochure.

Facilities

The Centre for Native Education is located on the third and fourth floor of Annex V. Its facilities and the space it offers is generally adequate and can accomodate a large number of students while maintaining a certain amount of privacy for those who wish it. The Centre's downtown location is ideal and easy to find.

There are three areas of concern involving the location of the Centre for Native Education. The first is the amount of stairs to negotiate to get to the Centre's offices. Although, climbing these stairs is not a problem where the staff is concerned, students have often complained about them. The second area of contention concerns the heating of the building which, depending on the room, goes from one extreme to the other. The hallway on the third floor as well as the two offices (V-310 and V-311) are overheated. The student lounge and the board room are generally cool but not necessarily uncomfortable. The entire fourth floor, on the other hand, is downright cold and with winter coming on, the rooms will be inaccessible. The Centre for Native Education has advised the Work Control Centre of this problem and the prognosis is that there is nothing that can be done about it... The last item is the state of cleanliness of the carpets. Although the Centre has been advised that the carpets are vaccumed on a weekly basis, evidence shows that this is not the case. In fact, dirt planted in strategic places has revealed that the Centre's carpets can go an entire month without being cleaned. Experience has shown that the carpets only get cleaned if the Centre lodges a complaint.

Conclusion

The Centre for Native Education believes that its role within Concordia University is crucial. Without personalized support, many Native students would not achieve academic success. The Centre is presently looking at ways of making itself more friendly and better known. The Centre would like to explore new ways of serving people as well as upgrade its current services. We hope to continue to serve Native and non-Native students in the future.